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**THE POLITICAL HISTORY OF ISLAM
AND ITS ROLE IN CONTEMPORARY ARAB RELATIONS**

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AUTHOR:

**MAJOR SHAWN M. DAWLEY
KENTUCKY AIR NATIONAL GUARD**

AY 09-10

Mentor and Oral Defense Committee Member: Dr. Douglas E. Streusand

Approved: _____

Date: _____

Oral Defense Committee Member: Dr. Francis H. Marlo

Approved: _____

Date: _____

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Executive Summary

Title: The Political History of Islam and its Role in Contemporary Arab Relations

Author: Major Shawn Dawley, Kentucky Air National Guard

Thesis: Muslim solidarity cannot overcome the ethnic, doctrinal and national barriers to global political unification but can work in tandem with the spirit Arab brotherhood to help advance regional alliances.

Discussion: Islam must be understood and considered as both a faith and a political institution if one is to appreciate its impact on current international relations. In contrast to some portrayals of Muslims as a homogeneous body seeking global socioeconomic and legal integration, Islamic solidarity will not exceed the broad notion of brotherhood due to three distinct factors: spiritual interpretation, ethnic differences, and nationalism. This paper explores the historical roots of the factional splits which mark Islam to the present, the cultural implications for a trans-Islamic community, and the role of Arab nationalism as both a cohesive *and* divisive force within the region's political environment. Especially when considering the histories of supranational Islamic and Arab organizations, this paper will develop the proposition that transcendent ideologies often succumb to the self-interests of nation-states. What this paper will also attempt to demonstrate is that there is a precedent for secular agendas successfully co-opting the communal spirit of Islam, and that future inter- and transnational movements may seek to legitimize their otherwise temporal objectives by couching their policies in spiritual language. This expedient usurpation of faith to advance secular strategies is more likely to occur within the Arab world where ethnic, cultural and doctrinal familiarities complement the Islamic concept of the *Umma*, or one community.

Conclusion: An Islamic empire that consumes contemporary nation-states and establishes a global caliphate is extraordinarily unlikely. International alliances that employ the politics of theology and race in the practice of self-interested statecraft are probable.

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Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	ii
DISCLAIMER.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
INTRODUCTION.....	1
THE EARLY HISTORY AND THEOLOGICAL SPLIT OF ISLAM.....	2
THE POLITICS OF ISLAM.....	8
ISLAM, ETHNICITY AND NATIONALISM IN THE MODERN ARAB STATES.....	11
THE EXPERIENCES OF CONTEMPORARY PAN-ISLAMIC / PAN-ARABIC ASSOCIATIONS.....	18
A THEORY OF FUTURE ISLAMIC AND ARAB INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS.....	24
A RETURN TO THE POLITICS OF ISLAM.....	27
ENDNOTES.....	29
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	34

Acknowledgements

“Less than informed” would have been a *flattering* description of my familiarity with the material about which I wrote this research paper. Through reading, experience and reflection it had been several years since I had used the word “they” when referring to the world’s one and a half billion Muslims; I understood that the Islamic world was not a monolithic, homogenous body. However, *knowing* that differences existed within the Muslim community was not the same as *understanding* those differences: Why are they there? Why are they perpetuated? Can they be overcome?

My journey towards that understanding is far from complete, if such a journey even could be completed. That said, I cannot thank my mentor Dr. Douglas Streusand enough. Associate Professor of International Relations at the United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College and adjunct professor at the Institute of World Politics, Dr. Streusand possesses a knowledge and understanding of Islamic affairs that was the critical resource for my study. Although my research involved countless hours of individual effort, the vast field of material was too overwhelming to be analyzed and synthesized without the guidance of an expert. For his direction and, more importantly, *patience*, I am indebted.

Finally, the support of my family was the essential “go/no-go” criteria by which I was able to complete this work. Each hour spent researching and writing this paper was an hour that I was not spending with my wife and children. Their understanding and patience were indispensable and deserve my appreciation... and demand my best attempts at restitution.

The barriers to total political integration of the global Muslim community will not be overcome. Despite a spiritual belief that is interpreted by some adherents that calls for a politically unified body of believers and a secular call for racial brotherhood, the differing doctrinal, national, ethnic and cultural demographics by which Muslims identify themselves will obstruct any attempts at absolute unification. This paper will explore the theological and political dimensions of Islam by tracing their interactions through the religion's revelation and growth, and examining their roles in contemporary Arab society. In the course of this examination one will see that the doctrinal religious split between early Muslims over rightful leadership of the body is likely an irreconcilable divide that will continue to thwart any attempt at unity. By separately exploring the institutional growth of Islam, this paper will develop the idea that the Islamic body was routinely assimilated into the political schemes of early and subsequent dynastic rulers. The intent is to demonstrate that co-option of Islam was not a sincere attempt to spread the faith but rather a shrewd maneuver to leverage the religious affiliation of a growing population so as to legitimize and empower a ruler's agenda.

As a subset of the global Islamic body, the ethnic Arab nations of southwest Asia and northern Africa possess cultural similarities that, superficially, appear to provide the foundational support for a transnational body. This paper will explore the role of nationalism in the distinctly different contexts of brotherhood and statecraft. In addition, it will review the official, if at least notional, position on the role of Islam in selected states. In doing so, this paper will develop the proposition that the racial and religious similarities resident in this territory have not and will not singlehandedly overcome the self-interests of citizens and states. Nations throughout the greater Arab territories will continue to pursue the localized interests of their own

states and will only rhetorically and disingenuously adopt the mantle of solidarity when it serves those interests.

Although this paper proposes that a global and sovereign pan-Islamic government or regional Arab governing coalition is unlikely, it argues that the ancillary role of Islam and its inherent association with Arab ethnicity in international relations may have a normative effect on future associations. This paper will conclude with a cursory examination of contemporary macro-social, -political and -economic conditions throughout the greater Arab world and consider the potential domestic influence that Islam and ethnicity may have *within* states in shaping future *international* policies. Unlike totalitarian Islamists or even benign supporters of Arab nationalism, this writer takes a mirrored position on the role of religion and race in political relations; Islamic unity or ethnic solidarity, in the form of a politically integrated community, will not serve as the wellspring *from which* social, economic and other matters of statecraft will flow, but rather the practitioners of polity will employ the ancient tactics of Islamic dynasties and the more contemporary techniques of Arab nationalism in which religion and race, respectively, are *adjuncts* to self-serving political operations. Reviewing the history of regional and global Islamic associations and Arab coalitions, and considering the contemporary issues in the pan-Arab world, this paper will argue that faith and ethnicity may yet serve as auxiliary factors in future political assimilation.

The Early History and Theological Split of Islam

Although some modern movements seek a so-called return to Muslim solidarity, early Islam was actually marked more by civil war than unity. Especially after the death of its founder, Islam witnessed an ensuing series of rebellions, inspired by claims to leadership, that established a seemingly permanent discord between Muslims. The following discussion will

examine the generally accepted history of Islam's theological precepts and the factional strife that marked its infancy. In doing so, consideration will be given to the Qur'anic notion of community to which Muslims subscribe, as well as claims to leadership of this community, of which Muslims disagree. As will be seen, the principle of unity was and is accepted by Muslims, but leadership of the faithful ushered in a series of bloody disputes that continues to inform the doctrinal divisions within the greater Islamic community.

Despite interpretive differences in modern practice, various sects tend to embrace certain core historical and theological roots of Islam. An Abrahamic religion in the tradition of Judaism and Christianity, Islam is Allah's final revelation to mankind through the archangel Gabriel (*Jibril*) to the merchant Mohammed over two decades.¹ Transmitted orally until a future father-in-law, Abu Bakr, began to have it compiled and recorded after Mohammed's death, the Qur'an was "standardized" over a period that spanned the subsequent reigns of Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman as a universal message to the "people of the book" and future converts, laying down the principal articles of faith for its community of believers.²

A monotheistic religion which explicitly rejected the polytheistic rituals of Arab pagans and the Christian faith in the trinity, Islam established through the Qur'anic principle of *tawhid* that there is but one God, who exercises sovereignty over all people.³ If one accepts the notion of a supreme being, he could then logically deduce that all others are inferior and subject to this being's dominion. Following this, then, it could be assumed that this common thread of submission weaves together those over whom He exercises His sovereignty, and His sovereignty is thus over one body. This community of believers is articulated in the third *sura* of the Qur'an. Specifically cited as the *Umma* (or *Umma Wahida*, literally "One Community") this is generally referenced as the unitary body of Muslims, transcending sectional or political boundaries.⁴ This

fundamental precept of Islam is supported by various practitioners, yet control over this body is vigorously debated, not just politically but theologically.

A title employed by the Qur'an to acknowledge the role of Adam⁵ as Allah's representative on earth, the term Caliphate (the anglicized version of the Arabic word *khalifa*) denotes the worldly leader of the *Umma*, especially as understood in Sunni doctrine.⁶ Unquestionably Mohammed was the leader of the Islamic community during his lifetime,⁷ but political and spiritual leadership over Muslims has been debated ever since. In the tradition of the times and place, Arab custom dictated consultation and selection based on merit by men of prominence.⁸ Through this process one of Mohammed's fathers-in-law, Abu Bakr, was chosen successor and has been accepted as the rightful caliph by Islam's majority sect, the Sunni.⁹ A minority of Islamic scholars disagrees and claims that evidence suggests a preference by Mohammed for succession to go to his cousin and son-in-law, Ali ibn Abi Talib.¹⁰ These dissenters follow the tradition of patriarchal lineage and are the members of the party (or "partisans") or Ali, the Shi'i.¹¹ Although in agreement with the Sunni in their support of an *Umma*, the Shi'i believe that legitimate leadership resides with the descendants of Ali, the Imams.¹² This early schism between Muslim adherents became known as *fitna*, considered to be spiritually rooted differences manifested as armed conflict. Although defined in the Qur'an as both "a temptation" of religious commitment and "a punishment by trial", *fitna* is typically used in Arabic literature in the context of "civil war" or "factional strife".¹³ It is the historical texts that seem more fully to inform contemporary discussion.

After the initial turmoil that characterized the succession of leadership from Mohammed to Abu Bakr, subsequent succession was less charged yet thinly concealed brewing animosities. As the mantle of Caliph passed from Abu Bakr to Umar ibn al-Khattab, administrative policies

put into place to organize the growing body contributed to dissension in that one's stipend or share of largess was determined by the timing of his conversion to Islam.¹⁴ When Uthman ibn Affan succeeded Umar in 644 and failed to counteract such uneven policies of distribution, dissatisfaction continued to germinate, leading eventually to his assassination in 656.¹⁵

Uthman's death cleared the way for Ali to assume leadership of the *Umma*. Considered by some to have been snubbed initially after Mohammed's death, Ali assumed power. This seemed appropriate to his initial and faithful "partisans", yet his apparent unwillingness to pursue those implicated in the assassination of Uthman, especially as perceived by those not of his constituency, was a critical catalyst to the first of the three early *fitnas*.¹⁶ At the Battle of the Camel in 656, forces under the direction of Ali defeated those acting under the control of A'isha, one of Mohammed's wives, and two of the prophet's esteemed companions, Talha and al-Zubayr.¹⁷ Although Ali's victory left A'isha enfeebled and her co-conspirators dead, this engagement did not extinguish the latent hostility directed towards his leadership.¹⁸ A new foe, Mu'awiya, soon rose to challenge Ali.

Mu'awiya, kin to Ali's slain predecessor Uthman, dispatched his provincial forces from Syria against those of Ali.¹⁹ Militarily indecisive, the campaign concluded with a sort of armistice arrived at through arbitration. This arrangement proved unsatisfactory to a significant faction within Ali's own body. Known as Kharijites, they believed that arbitration by intellectually fallible man was inconsistent with the Qur'anic precept of obedience to the judgment of Allah. According to the Kharijites, this judgment would have been manifested in victory for whichever side was truly just.²⁰ Although their insurrection was short lived, the Kharijite body survived and would threaten subsequent caliphates, starting with Ali. Assassinated by a Kharijite in 661 in what marked the end of the first *fitna*,²¹ Ali was the last of

Mohammed's companions to hold the title of *khalifa*. The assumption of leadership by Mu'awiya, ushering in what would be known as the Umayyad dynasty, ushered in the second *fitna* as well.²²

Al-Husayn, son of Ali and therefore a grandson of Mohammed, naturally rejected the legitimacy of his father's assassins as rightful rulers.²³ In 680 he mobilized a small following intended to propel him, as a patriarchal heir and rightful Imam, to Islamic leadership.²⁴ Intercepted by Umayyad forces while enroute to Kufa, al-Husayn was killed.²⁵ Considered immediately as a martyr by those Muslims who subscribe to the Shi'i doctrine of genealogical leadership by the family of the prophet, al-Husayn's is memorialized to this day in annual Shi'i ceremonies on the day of Ashura.²⁶ Unsurprisingly, the ultimate military victory of the Umayyads twelve years after the death of al-Husayn did not put to rest the spiritual debate amongst Islamic factions. From 692 until the eventual downfall of the Umayyads in 750, a growing movement continued to agitate for a return to familial rule.²⁷ This third civil war lasted for nearly sixty years, concluding with Umayyad submission to the Abbasid dynasty.²⁸ Although not a descendant of Ali, who was the fourth and last of the rightly guided caliphs (the *Rashidun*), the caliphate of the Abbasids began with a descendant of Mohammed's family, his uncle al-Abbas.²⁹

These three *fitnas* that engulfed early Islam have not receded from the collective memory of the Muslim community. While each *fitna*, as well as the debate and hostility that preceded the first, was a back-and-forth struggle that seemed to spread victory and defeat evenly amongst belligerents, the common thread of each factional rebellion was over leadership.³⁰ The early Shi'i claimed Islamic leadership was based on genealogy.³¹ Specifically, the Shi'i stipulated that only a descendant of Mohammed through his daughter Fatima and her husband Ali could

rightfully claim leadership, as Imam, over the Muslims.³² In contrast to the Shi'i, the Kharijites argued "pious righteousness" was paramount, not genealogy.³³ Eventually the Sunnis would synthesize a doctrine that legitimate caliphates could trace their history back through descendants of Mohammed's tribe, the clan of the Quraysh.³⁴

This profound disagreement among Muslims over spiritual leadership was further complicated given the inextricable relationship between religion and politics and the rapid expansion of Islam during its first centuries. The message of Islam was spread in its earliest days not by missionaries, but by militias and merchants. By the time of Mohammed's death, his and his faith's political dominion had spread to all of Arabia. As the nexus between commercial interests in Africa, the East and parts of Europe, the Arabian Peninsula was an effective communications node that worked in tandem with Islam's domestic military conquests to internationalize the religion through trade. Following the death of the fourth and final rightly guided caliph Ali in 661 A.D.,³⁵ it was the practical, not spiritual, component of Islam that gave rise to the major "political" caliphates of the Umayyads and Abbasids.³⁶ (Although the sultans of the Ottoman Empire would disingenuously adopt the title Caliph they were never effectively or universally received as such. In 1924, the president of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, completely ended the argument by officially relinquishing the title of Caliphate of the defeated Ottoman Empire, in his way essentially declaring as invalid the coequality of faith and governance.)³⁷

This separation of religion and politics, a widely accepted principle of western democracy and a null concept in atheistic governments, is incompatible with the theology of Islam. A revealed religion from an infallible being, Islam as Allah's literal message to His followers through the Qur'an was to establish a comprehensive system of living that supersedes

the social establishments of man. To “interpret” those areas of confusion or disagreement Muslim legal scholars of jurisprudence, or *fiqh*, consult the Hadiths of Mohammed, which account for his actions of Islamic obedience, the consensus of Muslim jurists (*ijma*), or employ analogical reasoning whereby the Qur’an and Mohammed’s *Sunnah* (experiences) are referenced for deductive understanding.³⁸ This collective effort produces an understanding of *Shari’a* law. From deciding international disputes to guiding daily living, this complete body of guidance is supposed to be the theological judicial foundation established by Islam.

In summary, Islam as a theology establishes a universal community of believers, the *Umma*, whose spiritual kinship supersedes any and all other affiliations. This body is to be led, through spiritual tradition, by a Caliph (in the Sunni juristic tradition) or an Imam (in Shi’i doctrine).³⁹ Especially for most Shi’i adherents, the community can have no legitimate leader until the Imam returns. The leader of the Caliphate owes allegiance, as Allah’s representative, to the *Umma*, not worldly institutions. In representing Allah, the Caliph or Imam does not make a distinction between the dominion of the state and the role of faith. Rather, through the Qur’an, *Shari’a*, the principles of *fiqh*, and the examples of the prophet, the universal leader of all Muslims would exercise spiritual leadership over all aspects of social behavior and political economy.

The Politics of Islam

As an ideology, Islamic theology is ideal; however, exercised through the ambitions and frailties of man it becomes subjected to the same mortalities that can undermine any philosophy or religion. “Macro”-Islam as a faith is significantly different from how it is practiced. In the preceding section the history of Islam was considered mainly from the perspective of religious maturation. In the following pages the growth of Islam *as an institution* will be examined

through the lens of political and international development. In this review one will recognize that the expansion of Islam was rooted more in the policies of the governing dynasties than in the power of the faith to perpetuate itself; early Islam had ardent followers, but the geographic reach of the religion was more political than spiritual. Just as early leaders co-opted many of the secular, traditional, or religious practices of 7th century Arabia to promote its growth, subsequent rulers of so-called Islamic nation-states co-opted the power of the Islamic faithful to secure for themselves the power to govern.

Through expedient revisionism early Islamic historians adapted several existing, non-religious or pagan practices as means to secure and promote their developing faith. Even during *al-Jahiliyah*, the “days of ignorance” that preceded Qur’anic revelation⁴⁰, people throughout Arabia made a pilgrimage to Mecca, an important collection point of major trading routes. This practice was adopted by early Muslims and became known as the fifth pillar of Islam, the Hajj.⁴¹ In another example of expedient co-option, early Islam laid claim to the shrine of the *Kabaa*, a pantheon of sorts housing the godly effigies of numerous Arabian deities.⁴² It was subsequently claimed as the site of Abraham’s act of obedience to God, whereby he was to sacrifice his son Isaac (in the Judeo-Christian tradition) or Ishmael (in Islam).⁴³ Thus the *Kabaa* was a gathering place for merchants, pagans, Jews and Christians well before Mohammed, and he recognized its political value. Given that his parent tribe, the Quraysh, essentially owned the rights to the *Kabaa*,⁴⁴ Mohammed was shrewd to appropriate its commercial and religious appeal for the spread of Islam. These early examples of the politicization of the faith, followed immediately by armed conquest throughout the peninsula, demonstrated a sharp and unapologetic willingness to intertwine spirituality with earthly ambition. In using the sword and the purse, Mohammed provided for the security and development of Islam during its birth and infancy. In a logical but

interesting reversal, successors to the helm would leverage the power of the faith as a means of securing their authority to wield the sword and raid the purse.

The first political dynasty after the rightful Caliphs was that of the Umayyads of Damascus. Inheriting a body of faithful that was rapidly expanding by the late 600s, the Umayyad empire ultimately reached from Spain in the west, through northern Africa, across all of Arabia, and as far east as Afghanistan.⁴⁵ This empire, fraught with civil wars and power struggles over politics and economics during its existence, eventually succumbed to revolt.⁴⁶ As mentioned previously, in 750 Abbas ibn Abd al-Muttalib, a descendant of Mohammed and Mohammed's tribe, dislodged the Umayyads from power and established the Abbasid Caliphate.⁴⁷ Moving the capital from Syria to Baghdad,⁴⁸ the Abbasids relocated the center of Islam away from its Arabian origins and near what was once Babylon, the capital of the Persian Empire. Experiencing a consolidation of the empire but ushering in what would later be called the Golden Age of Islam,⁴⁹ the Abbasid dynasty was perhaps an unintended triumph for egalitarianism, whereby new converts were not clients of conquering Arabs, but part of a truly cosmopolitan body.⁵⁰

Ironically, this shift in attention from ethnicity to religious identity was accompanied by the realization that the empire was becoming valued more as a political entity than a body of believers. When the Mongol forces of Hulagu Khan conquered the Abbasids in 1258⁵¹ it was the territory that was under attack, not Islam. Subsequent conquerors seeking essentially the same spoils as the Mongols, however, recognized the significance of the Caliphate as a potentially normative influence. After the Mongols assault, the term caliph came to denote only a legitimate Muslim ruler, rather than a unique successor of Muhammad. The Mamluk kingdom of Egypt and Syria maintained an Abbasid pretender in Cairo, but this pretense had little political

significance. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the Ottoman rulers, seeking to maintain prestige while losing power and territory began to use the title Caliph and claim a spiritual primacy over Muslim populations they did govern. In order to justify this claim, they fabricated a myth that the last Abbasid claimant had transferred his title to the Ottoman Selim I when he conquered the Mamluk kingdom in 1517.⁵²

Unlike during the Medina model of Mohammed's time, the rule of the *Rashidun* and subsequent dynasties saw the initial divergence of political and spiritual authority. Although secular agendas would claim *religious* legitimacy and religious movements would claim *political* legitimacy, the split that developed in the first century between the *ulemas*, or religious scholars, and those who sought to exercise sovereign authority is still in effect. With the exception of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in which Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's revolution of Twelver Shi'ism promoted *ulema* "rule" until the return of the Hidden Imam, recently no significant effort has been made truly to reunite religion and politics.⁵³ Rather, contemporary governments seek spiritual legitimacy through nominal constitutional rhetoric that pays homage to Islam but tend to govern in ways that may or may not be consistent with *Shari'a*.

Islam, Ethnicity, and Nationalism in the Modern Arab States

Contrary to the homogenous identity assigned to the greater Arab world by many outside observers there are significant differences and competing interests that inform the relationships of its states. Within the Arab lands there exists a nexus between statehood, ethnicity, Islamic identity and nationalism. Within this nexus reconciliation has been promoted but has proven elusive. In spite of constitutional codification of Islamic precepts by Arab governments there has yet to be a serious endeavor by any of their rulers to relinquish their sovereignty in the name of Muslim solidarity. Attempts at Arab unity in the form of ethnic nationalism have been short lived

or outright failures as well. Some early enthusiasts promoted pan-Arabism as an institution in and of itself, while others saw it as a stepping stone to future Islamic cohesion. Regardless of the teleological intent of either movement, pan-Arabism remains an abstract ideal incapable of supplanting nation-states as the principal actors in geopolitical relations. Although religious and cultural similarities pervade throughout the region, nineteenth and twentieth century European-enforced cartography remains an insurmountable obstacle to political assimilation of the faithful along ethnic lines.

It is a long, rich and controversial history that delineated the political boundaries of states throughout northern Africa, the Middle East and the broader Muslim world. Whether in the interest of commerce or security the political map of the pan-Islamic community is largely the product of foreign influence. Yet the colonial and pre-World War II demarcations of sovereignty were largely retained by those that were native to the land and then inherited or assumed positions of leadership. This created an interesting relationship between the religious and cultural identities of the peoples and the partially artificial nature of their modern states.

In identifying those countries whose populations are greater than 90% Muslim, one would have a *contiguous* landmass that begins in the west with Mauritania and Morocco, moves east across all the Maghreb in northern Africa, consumes every nation in and around the Middle East and Arabia (except Israel), extends past Iran into Central Asia, finally terminating at the western border of India⁵⁴. The people within this contiguous, pan-Islamic landmass share a common religion and are connected through territory, but speak Urdu, Pashtu, Dari, Kurdish, Farsi, multiple variants of Turkish, and French, among *numerous* others, in addition to Arabic.⁵⁵ Beyond differences in language, there are various disparities in economic systems and governing

institutions that run counter to the political and spiritual unification assumedly called for in theological doctrine.

The member states of this pan-Islamic territory are nominally structured under one of three political organizations. The first is that of an “Islamic State” (as named by the author), whereby there are, at least notionally, limited distinctions between the mosque and the bureaucracy. The second type is one in which Islam is the official state religion, but there exists a governing structure that is independent of direct Islamic influence. Turkey, one of the eighteen individual nations that form the contiguous pan-Islamic territory, is the only state that possesses an explicitly secular constitution.⁵⁶

The thirteen countries which this author classifies as Islamic States are constitutionally bound to the teachings and doctrine of Islam, as established by the Qur’an, Hadiths, or tradition. The source of governing authority and practice flows from the faith, for example:

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a sovereign Arab Islamic state with Islam as its religion; God's Book and the Sunnah of His Prophet, God's prayers and peace be upon him, are its constitution, Arabic is its language and Riyadh is its capital. (Article 1, Constitution of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia)⁵⁷

Islamic *Shari'a* is the source of all legislation. (Article 3, Constitution of Yemen)⁵⁸

Qatar is an independent sovereign Arab State. Its religion is Islam and *Shari'a* law shall be a main source of its legislations. Its political system is democratic. The Arabic Language shall be its official language. The people of Qatar are a part of the Arab nation. (Article 1, Constitution of Qatar)⁵⁹

West of the Arabian Peninsula, however, four states of the Maghreb have nuanced verbiage within their foundational documents that differentiate their forms of government from those of the Islamic States. Although they officially sanctify Islam as the religion of the state, the governments of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya identify the sovereignty of the people as the source of authority upon which they are founded, such as:

Sovereignty belongs to the Nation which exercises it directly by means of referendum and indirectly through its constitutional institutions. (Article 2, Constitution of Morocco)⁶⁰

Islam is the religion of the State. (Article 2) but “The People are the source of any power. The national sovereignty belongs exclusively to the People.” (Article 6, Constitution of Algeria)⁶¹

Thus, with the exception being Turkey, seventeen of eighteen individual states that are territorially adjacent and whose populations are over 90% Muslim are governed under constitutions that are at least notionally founded upon the tenets of Islam. Given the proximity and core religious identity of the citizens, it would seem that political unification was not just spiritually sound but logistically feasible. The barriers to the lofty ideal of the *Umma*, however, are intense, and can be roughly divided into the categories of doctrinal, ethnic and national.

Spiritual reconciliation among competing sects is unlikely to be achieved. Aside from the prominent factional divide between Sunni and Shi’i, there are myriad sectarian divisions within those, such as Wahhabism, Salafism and Sufism.⁶² In considering the aforementioned discussion of *fitna*, one understands that a true political unification that exceeds the simple notion of worldwide brotherhood is as unlikely within Islam as it probably is between Catholicism and Protestant denominations within Christianity. Even assuming that such doctrinal reconciliation is possible, there would remain the incompatible opinions on legitimate leadership of such a reconciled body; any progress toward factional resolution would likely be undermined immediately when it comes to the question of leadership. Given that the very nature of contemporary sectional strife traces its history to competing claims to leadership, any broad reunion of the sects would likely only exist so long as no attempts were made to establish a recognized authority over that body. In addition to the spiritual background of such a proposed leader, his ethnicity and home of record would also likely subvert his standing among those who do not share his personal narrative.

Aside from being the spiritual center of the faith, the geographic epicenter of Islam is Saudi Arabia, and the difference between the greater Arab world and non-Arabs continues to serve as an obstacle to unity. Revealed in Arabia, in Arabic, to an Arab, the religion of one fourth of the world's population is still strongly connected to its Meccan roots and inculcates an informal but strong distinction between the Arab Muslim world and the non-Arab Muslim world.⁶³ In addition to this unwritten spiritual delineation, the ethnicities of the Arab peoples are formally accounted for in many of their constitutions:

Algeria, being a land of Islam, an integral part of the Great Maghreb, an Arab land...

(Preamble to the Constitution of Algeria)⁶⁴

(T)o remain faithful to the teachings of Islam, to the unity of the Greater Maghreb, to its membership of the Arab family... (Preamble to the Constitution of Tunisia)⁶⁵

The people of Jordan form a part of the Arab Nation... (Chapter 1, Article 1, Constitution of Jordan)⁶⁶

Thus emanating strongly in all directions from Saudi Arabia except the east (where Iraq's mixed population of Arabs, Kurds and ethnic Persians make its founding membership in the Arab League seem more political than sincere), pan-Arabism serves as a continuing discriminator to the states of Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

Finally, in addition to the theological and ethnic obstructions to political unity within the contiguous Muslim states, there is the powerful force of nationalism. Nationalism, as either a supranational *cultural* ideology or as a foundation for *state* solidarity,⁶⁷ has two components. One concerns that of the governors, the other concerns that of the governed. Although theologically indoctrinated with the noble concept of the Caliph or Imam, most Muslims do not demand a practical application of a modern Caliphate. Other than a minority of the Islamic diaspora in non-Muslim lands and Islamist extremist groups that call for restoration of the Caliph,⁶⁸ citizens of states in the trans-Islamic community seem unwilling to trade their national

identity for political and spiritual unification. This jealous regard for citizenship stands in opposition to calls for pan-Arab unity that have been made by some for a century.

The modern history of Arab nationalism as a secular ideology was born in the aftermath of World War I, when non-Arab Turkish rule throughout the Middle East was supplanted with reinforced non-Arab French and British colonialism (following even earlier colonization in Africa). Unlike nineteenth century pan-Islamic writers who advocated theological unity throughout the greater Arab land, advocates of pan-Arabism promoted liberation based on ethnic homogeneity vice religion as the more dominant theme following resolution of the First World War. In three influential works that popularized the idea of Arab liberation, Sati al-Husri of Syria advocated that all Arabs, whether Muslim or Christian and without regard to citizenship, rally around their cultural and ancestral heritage in unity against imperialism.⁶⁹ An attempt to operationalize this political ideology took place during the next major geopolitical transition.

In the wake of anti-colonial sentiment and decolonization policies that followed World War Two, transnational brotherhood rung loudly among those who fought and labored together against common enemies. Articulated by two French-educated teachers, Syrians Michel Aflaq (Orthodox Christian) and Salah al-Din al-Bitar (Sunni Muslim), the doctrine of the Ba'ath party was quite unlike the Qur'anic basis of governance advocated for in early Islam.⁷⁰ Through establishment of theoretical "regional commands" throughout the larger Arab world, it was supposed that the governments of states would be subordinate to a supranational Arab authority. Playing an important role in the 1950s politics of Jordan, Syria, and Iraq, the Ba'ath party would eventually become the governing apparatus of the latter two.⁷¹ However, once in state power the governing elites of each nation became less inclined to abide by the supranational agenda of

“unity, freedom and socialism”, and instead exploited their positions for personal or, sometimes, stately gains.⁷²

The experiences of the Ba’ath movement paralleled, complemented and eventually conflicted with other secular and religious agendas. While leaders in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Transjordan were attempting to shed their nation’s French and British colonial pasts, so too did Gamal Abd al-Nassser navigate the post-WWII political terrain in an attempt to secure Egypt’s autonomy. Working through or around the religious ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood (who saw pan-Arabism as a necessary precursor to pan-Islamism), Nasser quickly veered towards a secular pan-Arab agenda when threatened by those who came to revile his alleged apostasy.⁷³ Eventually titled the Arab Socialist Union, Nasser’s party of the Egyptian state was to become a nucleus around which pan-Arabism was to form. Briefly subscribed to by Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya, the “United Arab Republic” was the manifested ideology of pan-Arab nationalism.⁷⁴ At the core of this union were a relatively secular ruler, Nasser, and a secular political ideology, socialism.⁷⁵ Against the backdrop of an increasingly tepid reception to authentic spiritual unity based on Islam, secular Arab unity following World War Two seemed ascendant in North Africa, the Levant and Southwest Asia. But this version of nationalism, in the context of a “nation” of people based on ethnicity, was not synonymous with the notion of nationalism in the context of conventional western statecraft.

Although the *rhetoric* of pan-Arab national unity seemed unabated in the 1950s and 60s, the political *actions* of the movements in that period were more in line with stately self-interest. Because the distribution and succession of power in many countries within the greater Arab territory is typically a hereditary or collegial commodity, shielded by constitutional monarchies or closely held arrangements, a ruler’s power could only be diluted, if not abolished, through

broader political unification. The resulting tension between pan-Arab nationalism *of the people* and self-interested nationalism *of the state* would lead to gaps between words and deeds. Within the setting of traditional international “balance of power” theory,⁷⁶ the relations between the member states of the contiguous pan-Islamic Arab landmass would pit the expediency of contractual benefit against the pursuit of some noble but intangible ideology.

But regardless of variety (ethnic pan-Arabism or self-interested statecraft), nationalism in the Arab Muslim world had a slightly more contextual influence on unity than Islam did during the latter half of the twentieth century. The spiritual solidarity of the Islamic faith seems unlikely to reconcile the competing doctrinal, ethnic and nationalistic barriers to political integration. Although religious or cultural identity alone is unable to overcome the obstacles to governmental unity and assimilate a diverse Muslim population into a unified body, mainstream international movements and associations have been founded upon the common denominator of Islam and Arab ethnicity.

The Experiences of Contemporary Pan-Islamic / Pan-Arabic Associations

Islamic identity as a unifying cornerstone is not a novel approach in the domain of international organizations and, as has been discussed, alliances tied to ethnicity are not new either. The preceding text has attempted to establish that competing religious and political agendas continually undermine tangible concordance when those endeavors seek unity based exclusively on faith or ethnicity. Following is an examination of supranational movements that have manifested into existence and are founded upon racial or religious identity. Although there are and have been various standing associations and temporary coalitions in the Islamic and Arab worlds, such as the Muslim World League and Islamic Developmental Bank, the two most prominent are the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and the League of Arab States.

Generic religious homogeneity and cultural similarity has proven cohesive in the way of forming organizations yet when it comes to subordinating self-interests in the name of Muslim or Arab solidarity, individuals and states seem willing to readily abandon such ideals.

Established in 1969 by thirty nations and now comprised of 56 member states, the OIC is an association of Islamic states, not Islamic people.⁷⁷ The OIC seeks to promote unity amongst the faithful, but in a manner that unambiguously respects the sovereign integrity of its member nations, as evidenced in its charter:

to be guided by the noble Islamic values of unity and fraternity, and affirming the essentiality of promoting and consolidating the unity and solidarity among the Member States in securing their common interests at the international arena;

to respect, safeguard and defend the national sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all Member States⁷⁸

Much more than nuanced language, the charter of the OIC establishes the state as the principal and lasting subcomponent of its organization, not as a transitory condition preceding a politically integrated *Umma*. In contrast to the theological doctrine of a single, socially incorporated body, the OIC charter is more consistent with western-style international pacts. In addition to structure, other features of the OIC charter that give it a character familiar to western observers are its aims, as outlined in many of its “Objectives and Principles”. For example:

To ensure active participation of the Member States in the global political, economic and social decision-making processes to secure their common interests;

To strengthen intra-Islamic economic and trade cooperation; in order to achieve economic integration leading to the establishment of an Islamic Common Market;⁷⁹

The Organization of the Islamic Conference is structured and operates in a manner comparable to that of the United Nations. The members are states, and goals are promoted not enforced. In addition to these similarities with the UN, the membership of the OIC also spans continents, hemispheres, cultures and ethnicities.⁸⁰

Markedly different from the OIC in these regards is the League of Arab States which, as the name would imply, is composed of a more homogenous constituency. Now comprised of twenty two independent states, the “Arab League”, as it is more commonly called, is geographically anchored by its original membership of Egypt, Jordan (Transjordan), Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen.⁸¹ Extending now past Egypt into all the Maghreb and Sudan, to the eastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula and to Somalia in the horn of Africa, the League of Arab States has been somewhat diluted ethnically and culturally.

Although given the inherent and obvious religious identity of its founding members, the League focused less on its spiritual character than on traditional western-style treaty objectives. But unlike the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s Article Five collective security arrangement,⁸² the pact of the Arab League provides for a security *forum* in the event of aggression against a member but stops short of compulsory armed reaction by the others:

In case of aggression or threat of aggression by a State against a member State, the State attacked or threatened with attack may request an immediate meeting of the Council.

The Council shall determine the necessary measures to repel this aggression. Its decision shall be taken unanimously. If the aggression is committed by a member State the vote of that State will not be counted in determining unanimity.⁸³

Aside from this limited, nominal verbiage related to security concerns, the pact of the Arab League shares many similarities with the Organization of the Islamic Conference in regards to membership and objectives:

The League of Arab States shall be composed of the: independent Arab States that have signed this Pact.

The purpose of the League is to draw closer the relations between member States and co-ordinate their political activities with the aim of realizing a close collaboration between them, to safeguard their independence and sovereignty, and to consider in a general way the affairs and interests of the Arab countries.⁸⁴

Just as the charter of the OIC sought to “promote” its agenda through states, the pact of the League of Arab States observes the sovereign independence and legitimacy of nations, vice people, and seeks to foster cooperation and collaboration, vice compulsion. Consistent with OIC, the League specifically enumerates economic, cultural, social and health issues as areas for partnership, and in that order.⁸⁵ Although the OIC and the Arab League use faith and ethnicity, respectively, for foundational cohesion, the stated pursuits of both organizations are much more expansive than their qualifications for membership. Cooperation in such areas as trade, finance, and communications technology is expressly ratified in each body’s constitution. Given the Arab League’s six-decade history and a forty-year record for the OIC, information is available by which to compare each organization’s ideals with its actions.

Especially as they consider security, the members of the OIC often place national self-interest ahead of Muslim unity. Recent evidence includes the attempt in 2003 for OIC solidarity in opposing the US-led coalition against Iraq, only to be undermined by Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Turkey to allow basing or logistical support to the coalition. Prior to that, the OIC proved unable to resolve the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 or successfully mediate the Iraq-Iran war during the 1980s.⁸⁶ Occasional, albeit limited, breakthroughs in Israeli-Palestinian dispute are absent OIC influence, and are often brokered by non-Islamic parties, especially the United States.⁸⁷ In 1992 the OIC gave the UN Security Council a “deadline to provide effective support” for the Muslim Bosniacs, after which the OIC would unilaterally intervene with support of its own. The January 15, 1993 deadline passed, the UN had not supported the Muslims, and the OIC did nothing more than rant about it in May.⁸⁸

As Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori points out in their 1996 book *Muslim Politics*, there are numerous political fractures between OIC members. There are pro-western

governments, such as Tunisia and Egypt, and Soviet-influenced regimes in Syria and Libya. There are oil-rich states and mineral-poor states. There are monarchies and there are republics. There are Africans, Arabs, Persians and Asians. When competing against these factors the record of the OIC to promote pan-Islamic solidarity and positively influence affairs in accordance with that principle is poor. Rather than transcending the national, cultural or ideological interests of its members in pursuit of a trans-Islamic agenda, the spiritual cohesion of its membership seems to yield to realpolitik more often than not. Given its birth following the 1967 Arab-Israeli War and in the immediate aftermath of the burning of the Al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, in which mere accusations about Jewish involvement inflamed anti-Israeli passions, the Organization of the Islamic Conference has been less vocal about what it is for than what it is against.⁸⁹ As an example, as of 1 Jan 2010 the “issues” page of the OIC website listed 21 articles and documents. Of these, one was a convention on combating terrorism, two were generic data reports on Muslims, and the remaining eighteen were about the “plight” of Islam in the world, with such titles as: “Human Rights in Palestine and Other Occupied Arab Territories”, “Poverty in Occupied Palestinian Territory”, “2008 Hate Crime Survey: Violence Against Muslims”, “Muslims in the European Union: Discrimination and Islamophobia”, et cetera.⁹⁰ The OIC provides a forum for protestation about real and perceived injustices to the Islamic community but routinely proves impotent in addressing them in a positive way.

Similar to the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the Arab League consistently finds rhetorical unity on many easy issues but is often unable to translate that unity into actions to confront tough issues. For example, the Arab League attained unity in pressuring Turkey to amend its impact on the flow of water from the Tigris and Euphrates and found a common voice in supporting Iraq against Iran in the 1980s.⁹¹ In an interesting dichotomy but nonetheless a

testimony to its ability to reach symbolic consensus, the Arab League mustered support to condemn the US embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania as well as responsive US airstrikes in Sudan and Afghanistan.⁹² In arguably the most compelling testament to its sturdiness, Arab League states condemned its capitol member Egypt for pursuing normalizing relations with Israel in 1979, going so far as to move the League's headquarters to Tunis, Tunisia. Strong enough to withstand this structural shock, the League readmitted Egypt within ten years, and has been led by Secretaries General of Egyptian citizenship since 1991 (an Egyptian has led the League since inception with the exception of the 1979 to 1991 period).⁹³

Other than these limited and often symbolic "successes", the Arab League has at best a mediocre record. Although inspired to combat mercantilist-based imperialism, ironically the Arab League could not dissuade Iraq from invading another member, Kuwait, in 1990. Nor could it persuade it to withdraw.⁹⁴ The Arab League, as its charter expresses, is an association of states, none of which are subject to an overarching authority. Lacking procedural and enforceable mechanisms to bridge differences, the League relies more on the ill-defined goodwill of Arab unity than anything else. On significant and transformational issues, Arab unity *alone* has not proven to be very influential. The unsuccessful attempt by Egypt and Syria to lead a supranational United Arab Republic preceded subsequent failures of Arab unity in both the 1967 Arab-Israeli War and the dissolution of the Syrian-Iraqi Ba'ath party.⁹⁵ The failures of the Arab League to transcend national issues and to resolve disputes in the name of Arab unity are numerous, and *institutionalized* pan-Arabism has been a "dead man walking for forty years".⁹⁶ However, despite the unwillingness of heads of state to subordinate themselves to pan-Arab solidarity, Arab identity can play an auxiliary role in regional relations. Although theologically inconsistent with an Islamic prescription of Muslim solidarity, pan-Arabism seems to be a

slightly more normative influence on regional inter-state relations than spiritual commonality. Although not dismissing entirely the marginal persuasion of religion, this writer suggests that the evidence of its ability consistently and substantially to subordinate disparate interests in the pursuit of a *specific* transcendent goal is non-existent. An Islamic empire that resembles the “Medina model” on a global scale is impossible and the pursuit of such a body by radical Islamists can do nothing more than destabilize the Arab, Islamic and larger world. Likewise, pan-Arab nationalism which subjugates statehood to supranational brotherhood is highly unlikely to materialize. That said, the rudimentary cultural homogeneity and religious doctrine of unity among Arabs may play an ancillary role in future assimilation if these demographics are adopted as political annexes in international statecraft.

A Theory of Future Islamic and Arab International Relations

Despite the theological, ethnic and national barriers to political integration of a worldwide or regional *Umma*, this writer purports that the nexus between Arab and Islamic identification in the “Arabian core” can provide a nucleus around which an increasingly larger alliance may be built. At the hub of this theory are several assumptions:

- 1) Nation-states will remain the principal actors but will gravitate towards relevant alliances when those alliances serve domestic needs
- 2) Economic cooperation will parallel or lead security cooperation
- 3) Governments will adopt “rational man” *policies* to further this cooperation while exploiting populist and spiritual *political* agendas

As part of this analysis the writer considers signatory states to the Greater Arab Free Trade Agreement (GAFTA) as comprising an Arab core. Composed of most of the members of the League of Arab States and a product of that organization’s Economic and Social Council,

GAFTA participants represent over 300,000,000 persons of ethnic and religious similarity.⁹⁷ Thus while they may self-identify by citizenship, constituents' possible objections to treaties may marginally be mitigated by their common culture. (To help illustrate, consider that US citizens are probably more likely to accept a treaty with Canada than Niger, even if the terms are identical. To be sure, the terms are paramount but one cannot look past the disarming effect of cultural commonality). At the same time, governing authorities should be comfortable incorporating into a trading bloc without fear of their governing authority being diluted since, as has been previously developed, the notion that these sovereign and independent governments will be amalgamated into a larger entity is false.

Steps toward economic cooperation (e.g. GAFTA) are underway and can continue to join together the aforementioned Arab core. In contrast to the charters of other regional trading pacts, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the GAFTA text acknowledges and embraces the greater homogeneity in its membership. For example, the NAFTA preamble describes the intent of the independent governments of the US, Mexico and Canada to “strengthen the special bonds of friendship and cooperation among their nations”,⁹⁸ while the six “fundamental principles” of ASEAN⁹⁹ speak forcefully to the supremacy of independent sovereignty. In subtle contrast to these traditional qualifiers often associated with inter-state associations, the language employed by signatories to GAFTA asserted in the opening text that economic cooperation would proceed “*from* their national faith in the unity of *the* Arab Nation” (emphasis added).¹⁰⁰ If even just nominally, the GAFTA community's deliberate recognition of its ancestral heritage as a way forward stands in nuanced contrast to NAFTA's and ASEAN's strictly economic aims and objectives.

Although petroleum exportation will continue to play a dominant role in the greater Arab economy, innovative approaches to expand the base of industry will begin to balance the power among member states. In the latest assessment by the World Economic Forum, it was reported that the territorially small countries of Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates were listed as the most competitive of all Arab nations. In addition to claiming this relative achievement, these states were in the top forty of *all* nations in the world.¹⁰¹ Rich in petroleum themselves, their economies were recognized more for those “set of factors, policies, and institutions that support sustainable gains in productivity and therefore economic growth”.¹⁰² As these states garner more of the finite Arab economy, the traditionally central powers, like Egypt, and well-funded nations, like Saudi Arabia, will see a proportional decline in their regional influence. The effect of this leveling may breed greater economic interdependence as countries are forced to pursue “comparative advantage” policies that play to their inherent industrial strengths. As Arab states pursue their relative economic strengths, the resulting “division of labor” will create organic industrial shortfalls that need be filled through trade, creating a cycle of increasing interdependence.

Economic interaction, especially to the extent that it creates a system of interdependence, will be followed, by necessity, with stronger security cooperation. In a tongue-in-cheek twist to Immanuel Kant’s democratic peace theory, it has been observed by Thomas Friedman that nations with “McDonald’s” do not wage war with one another.¹⁰³ An obviously simplistic deduction, this analogy between trade and truce is not without merit. Formal relationships and cross-pollinated economies will mitigate members’ proclivities to fight one another and also foster an atmosphere of mutual support when external threats materialize. Aside from the military alliances and bilateral defense treaties that intertwine themselves among such grand

associations as the European Union (and its predecessor the European Community) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, it is self-evident that their interdependent economies, of their own accord, provide an informal but strong defense of the status quo.

A Return to the Politics of Islam

To achieve this substantive degree of trade integration, interdependent security, and corollary political association, affected governments or opposition parties will pursue rational *policies* of self-interest but employ spiritual *reasoning* to secure legitimacy among their constituents. Whether a fundamental and tightly-held monarchy like Saudi Arabia or a relatively progressive republic, governments recognize that there is a compelling need to satisfy the spiritual concerns of the citizenry even if for non-altruistic purposes. Similar to previously cited examples, such as the adoption of the pre-Islamic trading pilgrimage as the Hajj and the recasting of the polytheistic Kabaa as an Abrahamic tradition, political leaders will move between the spiritual and the secular so as to leverage each for greater gain. In returning to the political roots of the Muslim faith some politicians will co-opt the communal spirit of original Islam as a basis from which to promote a secular agenda. In the contemporary application, it will not be the co-option of worldly practices to further a religious agenda but the reverse.

Governing leaders will channel the theological principle of the *Umma* as a means to dress their material pursuits in a pious context. They will aim to both secure their standing amongst their followers and marginally deflate Islamists' claims that many contemporary Muslim authorities are apostates. After accounting for the state nationalism that greatly informs the self-identification of citizens of core Arab states, it still remains that over 90% of the population in almost every country is Islamic.¹⁰⁴ The ability to appeal to one's spiritual dimension as a prime determinant varies by that individual's disposition, but is more often realized on a macro scale

when societies are collectively intellectually and/or materially impoverished. Although the core Arab *states* are experiencing positive growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), led especially by the Gulf Cooperation Council nations,¹⁰⁵ the impact on individual citizens remains uneven. Significant minorities in numerous Arab states live at or below internationally defined poverty rates, which creates large contingents of poor citizens.¹⁰⁶ In addition to this tangible paucity and despite recent gains, education and literacy in the Middle East and North Africa region, in aggregate, continue to lag most other parts of the world. The confluence of these two factors, poverty and sub-optimal education, among even a minority population create more susceptibility for spiritual influence.

If contemporary governors in the Arab community continue to integrate themselves into a stronger economic and political association there will be increasing use of theological reasoning to counter the secular objections of their opponents. Opposition to regional assimilation will likely be countered by an appeal to a ready audience of followers that, in addition to the logical benefits of association, it is a step towards the *Umma*. The willingness to employ the faith of Islam for political pursuit has a long history and is expedient today as it was in the seventh century.

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